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ABSTRACT

Women's studies teachers must be more self-conscious about the analytical framework which they adopt and present to their students, and the concept of gender and gender relations needs to be an integral part of that organizing framework. Women's studies is beyond the stage of compensatory work--the add women and stir method--and the debunking of the traditional disciplines. To provide students with the analytical tools necessary for a more thorough understanding of women's experiences, a gender relations approach--studying men in relation to women--is necessary. An analysis of gender highlights three variables that would structure the teaching of a women's studies course: (1) boundaries, or the structures which establish differences and commonalities between women and men, among women, and among men; (2) the social processes of negotiation and domination; and (3) consciousness, the subjective understanding of gender upon which people act as women or men. Using gender relations also helps students deal with the "not me" phenomenon, which says that students are individually exempt from patriarchy. Moreover, a theory of gender relations allows for better comparisons with other systems of domination. (RM)

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WOMEN'S STUDIES AS AN INQUIRY INTO GENDER RELATIONS

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Women's Studies as an Inquiry into Gender Relations

A special awareness of the significance of feminist pedagogy infuses women's studies. Propelled by a commitment to feminist social change, women's studies teachers have debated at length such issues as consciousness-raising in the classroom, the virtues of interdisciplinarity, "mainstreaming," and the need for greater awareness of race and class. At the same time, there has been relatively little discussion of the content of introductory women's studies courses, particularly with respect to conceptualization. In this paper, we wish to discuss the need for greater clarity in conceptualizing women's studies, especially in introductory courses where the problems are most acute. We argue that women's studies teachers must be more self-conscious about the analytical framework which they adopt and present to their students. Further, we suggest that the concept of gender and gender relations--currently a topic of much debate in feminist scholarship but less prominent in the women's studies curriculum--be an integral part of that organizing framework.

Introductory courses in women's studies contain a laudable range of pedagogical methods, intellectual disciplines and specific issues; despite their variety, several generalizations may be made about their content. First, such courses serve a compensatory function, by teaching students about women's contribution to knowledge, history and society, contributions which had been denied or trivialized in the traditional disciplines. Second, women's studies courses have produced a critique of the established intellectual disciplines, whose sexist biases belie claims to scientific objectivity. Asking questions about women's experiences has necessarily led to a questioning of the disciplinary canons and how that knowledge was derived. Third, intro-

ductory women's studies courses offer an analysis of the nature and consequences of sexism and the potentiality of social change. Most courses examine a variety of issues such as health and reproductive rights, discrimination in the workplace, politics, and the media. At the same time, many introductory courses direct attention to the divisions within women's experiences, particularly the effects of class and race and the impact of heterosexist and agist ideologies. Finally, women's studies courses assess the contribution of feminism as a theory and social movement for change.

These broad areas of concern continue to shape the content of women's studies courses, although the 1970's and 1980's have witnessed important changes in the data and approaches used. The burgeoning empirical research on women and increasingly complex analyses have been taken into account in the classroom. In the early 1970's, women's studies courses seem to have adopted several approaches: (1) "myth vs. reality," in which myths about women were debunked and demeaning images revealed; (2) the oppression model of women's experience, which focused on female victimization and powerlessness; and (3) the romantic approach, which rediscovered women heroines and celebrated women's achievements. Ten years later, our understanding of women's experience is far more sophisticated. New ways of thinking about women have emerged. To name only a few examples, current research explores the concept of a female culture and informal networks among women; it debates the active vs. passive models of women's behavior, examining the ways in which women both resist and contribute to their oppression; it studies power relations on both the micro and macro levels; and it analyzes women's oppression in the context of interacting systems of production and reproduction. Such concerns reflect the rapid advancement of scholarship on women, and necessarily shape the ways in which introductory courses are

taught.

Beyond the new scholarship, broader questions about the nature and purpose of women's studies are shaping the content of the courses we teach. Particularly important is the debate over women's studies as an autonomous discipline or field, and the desirability of mainstreaming women's studies into the university curricula. On the one hand, feminist teachers are cognizant of the dangers of ghettoization and the benefits of transforming the disciplines by the inclusion of feminist perspectives. Few, however, wish to see the liquidation of women's studies departments or programs, and some have argued that women's studies constitutes a separate field of intellectual endeavor. As mainstreaming occurs, it will be necessary to clarify the rationale for separate women's studies courses and programs. As part of this process, we would argue, feminist teachers must generate theoretical foundations and conceptual approaches in their courses.

Other educational concerns have affected the content of introductory women's studies courses, particularly the emergence of a new student constituency. It is folk wisdom among college teachers today that their students are different from those of a decade ago, more conservative, passive, goal-oriented, and career-minded. For teachers of women's studies, another characteristic has become salient: the belief of many students that the condition and status of women have changed dramatically and positively over the last fifteen years. Where feminist teachers continue to see a world of gender hierarchy and inequality, our students (the 18-22 year old models) paint a different picture, one of career opportunities, companionate relations between the sexes, and the inevitability of women's progress. The tendency of feminist instructors is to view such attitudes as naive, to be enlightened

through consciousness raising. At the same time, many of the inequities and prejudices that were so obvious in 1970 are now more nuanced and ambiguous; documenting the persistence of sexism to our students has become a more difficult task.

College students are increasingly separated from their instructors by different historical and cultural experiences. Too young to have experienced the necessity and force of the feminist movement in the late 1960's and early 1970's, they have nonetheless reaped its benefits. Our students often dismiss sexism as a largely historical problem from which they believe they are exempt. Taught increasingly to be doers and makers of their destinies, they are suspicious of approaches which see women as victims of oppression, as objects rather than subjects, or that generalize about women's roles. Moreover, they demand to hear the "male point of view" and question an exclusive focus on women. As products of the American educational system, they approach social theory gingerly and uncomfortably, preferring "common sense" explanations based on individual motivation and socialization. As feminist teachers, we cannot merely label this consciousness as false, but must recognize that it is a product of significant social changes over the last fifteen years; our students pose an important challenge to the ways in which we conceptualize women's studies.

The changes surrounding feminist pedagogy outlined above lead us to call for greater conceptual clarity in women's studies courses. We are beyond the stage of compensatory work--the "add women and stir" method--and the debunking of the traditional disciplines. Women's studies is moving toward the "radical reconstruction" of knowledge, the creation of new and compelling paradigms with which we can interpret human society. As teachers, our aim should increasingly be to develop rigorously in our students the

analytical tools and conceptual frameworks necessary for understanding the experiences of women.

Toward this end, we believe that a theory of gender relations must play a key role in our teaching. Feminist researchers in a wide range of fields have called for a new approach which locates the social relations of gender at the center of scholarly investigation, arguing that we cannot understand the experience of women--or of men--without viewing it in relation to the other group. The concept of gender relations addresses the question of how and why difference between women and men is socially established and maintained, and thus speaks to the central issue of differential power and status. We suggest that this concept of gender relations frame the teaching of women's studies, an approach which we believe to be more rigorous in its analysis of women's experience, sensitive to the complexity of human agency, and more able to meet the concerns of our students.

First, we will outline our analysis of how a system of gender relations operates, how it is maintained and altered. It should be noted that we are not discussing the origins of patriarchy, nor the intersection of gender with other social relations such as class and race. Naturally such concerns would hold a prominent place in an introductory women's studies course; our more limited focus, however, lies specifically in the analysis of gender.

We define gender as the historical and social relations between women and men as social groups, among women, and among men. Gender is made--created and recreated through the interactions of individuals, who

interpret and express its meaning in everyday life. Thus gender is not a rigid or reified analytical category imposed on human experience, but a fluid one whose meaning emerges in specific social contexts. Our analysis of gender highlights three variables which would structure our teaching of women's studies: (1) boundaries, or the structures which establish differences and commonalities between women and men, among women, and among men; (2) the social processes of negotiation and domination, which are the means by which the boundaries are maintained and changed; and (3) consciousness, the subjective understanding of gender upon which people act as women or men. Each of these factors potentially interacts with and is interdependent on the other; thus explanations of stability and change in a system of gender relations must examine the continuity or alteration of all three variables.

With respect to boundaries, relations between gender groups have been, and continue to be defined by varying degrees of separation and distance. The most obvious boundary, and a common conceptualization in women's studies courses, is that of "separate spheres." This framework describes the assignment of women to the domestic realm, men to the public realm, the physical separation between both, and the social prestige attached to the public domain. While its contributions remain significant, the notion of separate spheres tends to reduce social life to two discrete categories, bifurcating women and men's lives, ignoring the interaction. Certainly it is a concept more applicable to the 19th century than in contemporary social life, where women have entered the workplace and men appear to be more concerned with domesticity. An analysis of boundaries at all levels may be a more sensitive indicator of gender relations. Such an analysis would examine not only physical separation, but also psychological

and social space. As physical separation between the sexes diminishes, how are gender differences created and exaggerated? In the classroom, one could fruitfully examine the literature on verbal and nonverbal interaction, the social construction of sexuality (particularly the requirements of heterosexuality), and the sexual division of labor as means of creating boundaries and difference. Such an analysis might suggest some of the connections between micro and macro levels of analysis. Further, one could explore the relationship between different types of boundaries as a means of assessing stability and change in gender systems. For example, a comparison might be made between the gender arrangements in the 19th century, with its confluence of ideology and material conditions reinforcing women's domesticity, and the situation of the 1950's, which contained a tension between the "feminine mystique"ideology and fact of women's rising labor force participation.

As we stated earlier, gender relations are dynamic; while identification of structural boundaries is a necessary first step in an analysis of gender, it is through processes of negotiation and domination that we derive an explanation of how boundaries are established, maintained and changed. One of the greatest contributions of feminist scholarship has been its analysis of male domination in its physical, institutional and ideological dimensions. Men have been "on top" throughout history, and women's studies courses necessarily examine the content and form of male control and female response as they change over time and in different settings. Thus most courses examine violence against women, political and economic domination (e.g. the welfare system), and cultural oppression through pornography and advertising.

At the same time, we should avoid in our teaching the assumption that women are passive victims of a system of power. While women are not

not responsible for their own oppression and exploitation, they are nonetheless agents who can choose to act within certain constraints. We need to explain the ways in which women cooperate in setting up and maintaining the dynamics of gender relations, as well as the ways in which they resist. While feminist theories of domination explain how women are oppressed by men, another concept--that of negotiation--describes a process in which women and men bargain for privileges and resources. We would argue that these processes are interconnected and exist concurrently; both need to be described and analyzed if women's experiences are to be understood. The concept of negotiation suggests human agency. Both women and men are active participants, sometimes asking or inviting, sometimes demanding that resources be shared or reallocated. In this formulation, both women and men have some resources which they control, although the distribution is usually unequal; it further suggests that <u>both</u> parties to a negotiation must agree in order for it to take effect. The process of negotiation, therefore, is mutual and reciprocal.

In our teaching, the idea of negotiation can begin to offer students some of the reasons why women choose to maintain or resist the system of gender relations. Taking a "blame the victim" approach, students often ask why a woman would <u>choose</u> what they perceive to be an oppressive position, e.g. a secretary or housewife. While the oppression model stresses women's coercion, attention to the process of negotiation suggests that women may perceive they have something to gain. For example, the fact that women do "kin work," that is, the labor involved in sustaining or nurturing ties and affiliations among kin, provides them with a set of resources. They gain greater knowledge about kin, derive stronger family ties, and have more participation in planning kin gatherings. As a result, women gain control

over the area of kinship, and permitt men access only if and when they so desired.

Attention to the process of negotiation also gives us insight into the subtle maintenance and change of structural boundaries. The feminization of clerical work in the late 19th century, for example, involved such a process. Women were "invited" into the office as clerical workers, crossing a boundary that years earlier they could not have transgressed. Women gained new jobs which appeared to offer better opportunities for wage earning, while men both gained an inexpensive labor force and could avoid deskilled and devalued work. This involved some shift in boundaries--both with respect to the physical location of women's work as well as its ideological justification--but did not seriously disrupt the system of gender relations. How, then, do significant changes occur? The answer to this question, we would argue, lies in our third variable, consciousness.

Consciousness exists in a reciprocal and dynamic relationship to social structures and processes. A system of gender relations is not comprised solely of objective conditions, but is apprehended and understood subjectively. People make sense out of their lives and their worlds through consciousness, and gender is one of the primary conceptual tools used. Here we wish to distinguish three types of consciousness. The first, gender awareness, is basic to the development of the subsequent two forms--female/male and feminist/anti-feminist. Gender awareness of one's self as female or male permeates most facets of everyday life. It involves largely descriptive attributions, and accepts the existing gender arrangements as natural and good. Residual dissatisfaction with the way things are is individualized as a personal, not collective problem.

The second form of gender consciousness, female or male consciousness, goes beyond descriptive attributes to a recognition of the rights, privileges, and obligations associated with being female or male. It contains within it a reactionary element, since it accepts and even glorifies status quo definitions of womanhood and manhood; at the same time, it may lead to collective social action which is revolutionary in its implications. The source of such consciousness lies in one's location in the system of gender relations, and emerges as an outcome of processes of negotiation and domination. Thus consciousness is dynamic and malleable. Recent research points out some of the dimensions of female consciousness which broadly emerge from women's experience of boundaries and social processes: (1) a greater concern with the survival needs of family and community at the level of concrete reality, rather than abstract theory; (2) a moral sensibility defined by mediating between persons and fulfilling obligations to them; and (3) a generalized consciousness of constraints and inferiority. The question of male consciousness remains to be addressed. We would wish to know what are the effects of relative power on consciousness, and how different structural locations and participation in social processes shape male consciousness.

Finally, we differentiate female/male consciousness from consciousness that is explicitly feminist or antifeminist (masculist). To paraphrase Marx, we need to understand the formation of a gender for itself. Such consciousness involves a highly articulated challenge to or defense of the system of gender relations, a shared group identity, and a growing politicization that results in a social movement. We would want to ask our students, in what circumstances do women and men define their interests as gender based? Thus we would examine the growth of feminist and antifeminist

consciousness and action in specific contexts, as well as the interaction of such gender-conscious groups. Such an approach would allow for greater sophistication in the analysis of the feminist movement, which is often presented solely in terms of formal organizational development and ideology (e.g. the history of suffrage). Looking at women as active creators of social life, we must examine areas of female assertion and power outside the organized feminist movement. We would also wish to discover the circumstances in which some women develop female consciousness, others feminist consciousness, and how some women bridge those two forms. At the same time, it will be necessary to explore the reasons why gender consciousness does not develop in some women, who choose to identify with their class, race, ethnicity, or sexual preference.

Conclusions

In the beginning of this paper, we suggested several reasons for using a theory of gender relations in teaching women's studies, particularly at the introductory level. We have argued that such a conceptualization would yield a richer and more comprehensive understanding of women's experiences and would be closer to students' needs as well. While our own teaching experiences using this approach are still too limited to accurately assess our successes and failures, we can make several observations about its application and consequences.

Our primary concern has been that by not focussing exclusively on women, we would subvert the real basis and and meaning of women's studies. We have been defensive about capitulating to some obligatory feeling that we should spend more time studying men. We have found, however, that a gender relations approach--studying men in relation to women, with women at

the center of human experience--is transforming existing knowledge about women far beyond the compensatory approach. Our understanding of women's experience does appear to be more thorough. For example, in our teaching about women and the workplace, there are numerous studies which compare women and men's opportunities and rewards. This research is largely descriptive; it can accurately catalogue the parameters of sex segregation in the labor force and make appropriate connections between these divisions and wage and salary rates. But this compensatory approach of adding women to the study of marketplace activity and comparing women to men in a static fashion, does not begin to answer the more complex questions of how and why things are the way they are. Some recent research which can be used in teaching does address these issues by examining the relations of gender (e.g. Ehrenreich and English, For Her Own Good; Hartmann, "Capitalism, Patriarchy and Job Segregation by Sex"; and Kanter, Men and Women of the Corporation). We would maintain that our understanding of workplace phenomena derived from such works is far more complete than those which focus exclusively on women.

Using gender relations also helps us deal with two specific issues we encounter in our undergraduate students. One of these is the "not me" phenomenon: that students are individually exempt from patriarchy. A theory of gender relations instructs us that there are no true exclusions from a system of gender arrangements. Some people may be more or less privileged, some may be more or less conscious, and some may experience the effects more or less directly than others. But by definition we are all participants in a system of gender relations, making choices in that system and experiencing their consequences. Students' assumptions about

the inevitability of progress are also confronted by the concept of gender relations, which is a concept of dynamism and change. Anyone taking seriously the dimensions of change over time must learn that the gains of feminism are not inevitable but are made and can be unmade. The recognition of human agency in creating social arrangements of gender would, we hope, lead students to connect analysis with action.

Moreover, a theory of gender relations allows for better and more telling comparisons with other systems of domination. Gender is the study of a system of relationships among women, between women and men, and among men, just as racism, for example, is the study of relationships among people of color, between people of color and white people, and among white people. With a symmetrical form of analysis we may more readily understand the commonalities and distinctions among different systems of oppression; we should also appreciate the complex ways in which systems of oppression intersect, modify, and support each other.

We have every reason to believe, therefore, that a pedagogy and theory of gender relations promises a more thorough and sensitive understanding of women's lives.